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**For information**

## **Field visit to Central African Republic by Ambassador Andrei Dapkiunas (Belarus), President of the Executive Board, 26 February - 5 March 2006**

### **Introduction**

1. The visit by the President of the Executive Board to Central African Republic was the first visit by any member of the Board to that country and the first individual visit of a President of the Executive Board to Africa. The main purpose of the visit was to get first-hand experience of the activities of a UNICEF country office operating in challenging conditions. The visit also focused on studying the implementation of the country programme in relation to the priorities of the medium-term strategic plan (MTSP) and the quality of coordination and partnership of UNICEF with the Government, United Nations agencies, bilateral donors and civil society organizations.
2. The visit came at a particularly opportune time as the United Nations Country Team (UNCT), headed by the UNICEF Representative as United Nations Resident Coordinator a.i., was concluding its work on the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) document for 2007-2011 and the Government was finalizing the poverty reduction strategy paper (PRSP), with support from the United Nations system in general and UNICEF in particular.
3. The programme of the visit included meetings with national officials (the President of the Republic, the Prime Minister, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Economy, Finance, Education, Health, Commerce), a series of discussions with the UNCT and UNICEF staff and a visit to the countryside where UNICEF projects are implemented.
4. The President's visit provided an important overview of the situation of children's rights in Central African Republic and the contribution of UNICEF to its improvement through implementation of the MTSP. The visit allowed the President to see UNICEF at work at the field level and to advocate for children's issues with national and local authorities, the UNCT and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The President was satisfied with the results, especially the partnerships he saw in action, the quality of the relationship between the Government and UNICEF, the high level of United Nations coordination and the leading and pioneering role of UNICEF.
5. This report will focus mainly on key observations and lessons learned from the visit.

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\* E/ICEF/2006/10.

## **Background**

6. Central African Republic is one of the poorest countries in West and Central Africa. Per-capita income has been decreasing steadily over the course of the last two decades. Widespread poverty hinders access to social services. Political instability, military unrest, governance issues, insecurity and the ensuing indifference of the international community have not been conducive to the realization of children's rights.

7. The trends in the situation of children and women in Central African Republic are among the worst in the world. During the last 10 years, life expectancy at birth has declined by an average of six months each year. Infant, under-five and maternal mortality rates have steadily increased. The school enrolment rate has also declined to its current 31 per cent, which is lower than it was 46 years ago when the country gained independence. The prevalence of HIV/AIDS is increasing. The challenge for the country is how to stop the deterioration of social indicators resulting from poor economic performance, political instability and insufficient international support and to reverse the current trend.

8. The UNDAF for 2004-2006 had three main themes: governance; post-conflict relief; and HIV/AIDS. The UNICEF programme of cooperation has four main elements: child survival and development, girls' education, HIV/AIDS and child protection.

9. The programming environment is characterized by a series of challenges: an enduring political and military crisis; prevailing insecurity, to the point where all field visits require military escorts; insufficient government revenues with, among other consequences, unpaid salaries for civil servants for many months; destruction of basic social infrastructure; lack of roads, compounded by the fact that the country is land-locked, which is a major constraint for supply delivery; political tensions in neighbouring countries (Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sudan) and their humanitarian impact on the Central African Republic; and the lack of sufficient international assistance.

## **Meetings with government officials, development partners and the UNCT**

10. The dominant themes emerging from meetings with national authorities were the virtual "abandonment" of the country by the international community, its negative impact on children and social indicators and the hope that the country's gradual political stabilization may improve prospects for the increase of international assistance. As the Minister of Foreign Affairs put it in his passionate plea to UNICEF and to the international community at large, "there is an urgent need to listen to the silent suffering of Central African children".

11. The President used the opportunity of his meetings with the President of the Republic, the Prime Minister and cabinet ministers to ensure that children's issues are taken adequately into account in the PRSP. The President encouraged high government representatives to ratify the Optional Protocols of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and to speed up the adoption of the National Code of Protection of Children which has just been developed.

12. Meetings with the authorities gave the President of the Executive Board an opportunity to witness an exceptionally good working rapport and high level of understanding and cooperation between the Government of Central African Republic and the UNICEF country office.

13. The President met with development partners, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and the UNCT. At these formal and informal meetings, the President was briefed on the humanitarian and development context, the political situation and the United Nations reform process (UNDAF, joint programming, etc.).

### **Project site visits**

14. The visit to the programme for **integrated early childhood development** (*Développement intégral du jeune enfant* (DIJE)) was one of the cornerstones of the President's trip. This programme is piloted in the sub-prefecture of Boda and the President was able to see its implementation in the villages of Bombeti, Bombale, Bomandoro and Cotonaf. The next phase of the project will cover the entire district of Lobbaye. The third phase will involve the whole of the country.

15. This programme aims at giving a good start to life to children aged 0-8 years by promoting their physical, psychomotor, intellectual and emotional development. Children are cared for through parental education as well as in community stimulation centres (*Espaces communautaires d'éveil*). These centres provide integrated services to children aged two to five years including immunization, medical check-ups, vitamin A and iron supplementation, growth monitoring, early stimulation and two meals per day. Early childhood development is used as an entry point for community development.

16. Key aspects of the programme are as follows: an integrated approach combining health and nutritional interventions with water and sanitation, as well as early stimulation; encouragement of community participation with a special emphasis on women's empowerment; and capacity-building of families and communities through development of child-rearing skills and information and communication of knowledge.

17. Partnership based on comparative advantage is another key element of this programme. In addition to UNICEF, which leads the design of the programme and specific interventions (water and sanitation in schools and early child stimulation), many other institutions make this programme a success: the World Food Programme for young child feeding; the World Health Organization and the European Union for integrated management of childhood illnesses; the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for food security and income-generating activities for women; and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) for prevention of HIV/AIDS.

18. While children under eight years of age are the main target of this programme, women and communities are also benefiting from its activities. Key results so far include: seven communities have completed construction of their "Women's House" (*Maison de la Femme*); 15 communities have started activities with 1,600 pre-school-aged children in community stimulation centres with voluntary workers; three community schools have been built; all schools, all community stimulation centres and each community in the programme now have adequate drinking water as well as a water management committee; health services have been strengthened; and a model of a low-cost latrine has been developed, tested, validated and disseminated in households and communities.

19. Special attention must be drawn to the results achieved in the community stimulation centres, which go beyond typical day-care centres. In addition to providing integrated services to

children, the centres also give mothers the time to take care of other family activities (cultivation, etc.) and enable siblings, especially girls, to go to school. The improved health and nutritional status of children is well documented and all children attending the centres now have a birth registration certificate.

20. The DIJE programme reconfirms the effectiveness of an integrated and participatory approach based on steps and measures which are simple and cheap yet have lasting results, especially concerning young child feeding, immunization and water, sanitation and hygiene. Many of the communities have decided to build schools closer to them, thus improving school attendance. The willingness of local communities to become involved in a collective effort to improve the well-being of their children was perceived as a solid foundation of any positive change to come.

21. With the evident political will at all levels (central and local), the partnerships built around this programme, the community mobilization and the results obtained so far are all key ingredients of its success and should contribute to meeting the main challenge of taking this programme to scale. Another challenge is the “motivation” of children’s caretakers (*encadreuses*). Revenues from income-generating activities have not yet reached the level of being sufficient to pay these caretakers. The possibility of including their salaries in municipal budgets is being explored.

22. As part of this programme, a national young child policy is being developed. This policy would be an important contribution to the PRSP and will help ensure sufficient resources for scaling up the programme to national level.

23. In the sub-prefecture of Boda, the President also visited the Health Referral Centre, which has been rehabilitated by the European Union and UNICEF. An ambulance provided by UNICEF and solar-powered radio equipment in strategic locations will enable early referral of pregnant mothers for emergency obstetrical care. Bicycles will be provided to villages without radios to facilitate access to villages with radios for dispatching the ambulance where needed.

24. **Support to orphaned and vulnerable street children.** High HIV/AIDS prevalence and continuous political and military crises have resulted in an increase in the number of street children, currently estimated at 6,000. Most of these street children are orphaned and vulnerable children (OVCs) because of HIV/AIDS, and are particularly vulnerable to abuse, discrimination, economic and sexual exploitation and drug abuse.

25. The President visited many NGOs dealing with these children, including the Don Bosco Vocational Training Centre, *Centre d’Ecoute des Castors*, *Centre d’Information et d’Education de l’Ambassade Chrétienne* and *Fondation Voix du Coeur*.

26. UNICEF activities in this area aim at: (a) strengthening the capacities of various institutions in caring for and facilitating the family and social reinsertion of these children; (b) conducting studies and monitoring and evaluation; and (c) coordinating actions.

27. UNICEF has helped to strengthen NGO capacities in the areas of delivery of health and boarding services for children (for example, through equipment for the NGO *Voix du Coeur*), provision of vocational training (through the equipment of the Don Bosco Centre) to improve outreach capacities of NGOs, the Municipality of Bangui and the Department of Social Affairs through the delivery of vehicles.

28. Studies and monitoring and evaluation activities focus mainly on documenting protection problems through a participatory causal analysis of the phenomenon of street children, including a cartography of their spatial and temporal mobility. Training and management instruments were developed, and the guide for educators of street children is being used as a reference manual for educators at the national level. Operational research on the treatment of tropical ulcers has permitted speedy and cheaper treatment of ulcers using honey.

29. In terms of coordinating activities, UNICEF has supported the creation of an operational network of NGOs dealing with OVCs. This network has put in place a system of referrals which leads to synergies among NGOs. A coordination committee on OVCs has been established. This interministerial structure, with representatives of civil society and development partners, meets monthly and guides and follows up interventions affecting OVCs. A centre for research, listening, orientation and coordination, which is to be inaugurated very soon, will be a key coordinating instrument.

30. One of the most impressive elements of the work of NGOs dealing with OVCs and the prevention of HIV/AIDS among young people is the involvement of young people themselves as peer educators. This was most evident at the *Centre d'Information et d'Education de l'Ambassade Chrétienne*, where former street children and college students were very active as peer educators.

31. **Prevention of parent-to-child transmission of HIV (PPTCT).** The President visited the *Bangui Complexe Pédiatrique*, one of 16 sites for improved PPTCT service delivery supported by UNICEF. The project aims to promote family and community support for pregnant woman in order to know their HIV status, to reduce stigma attached to HIV/AIDS and to use PPTCT services.

32. This project is made possible through the active partnership of UNDP, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, WFP (for foodstuffs), UNFPA (for training health and NGO staff in the production of messages and audio-visual supports), the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (for a knowledge, attitude and practices study) and other associations involved in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

33. Key results of the project include an increase of 15 per cent from 2004 to 2005 in the use of testing services by pregnant women, an increase of 11 per cent during the same period in the proportion of women who came back to get their results and a 1-per-cent increase in the utilization of services by male partners.

34. One of the most important challenges of the *Complexe pédiatrique* is the need to take care not only of the child, but also of the accompanying mother. The strategy of caring for the mother and child will definitely be more effective and efficient than caring for the child alone.

35. **Expanded programme on immunization and the cold chain.** Under-five mortality has been on the increase in Central African Republic during the last decade and immunization coverage has been decreasing. Epidemics of measles, pertussis and neonatal tetanus are prevalent. UNICEF supports immunization service delivery (strengthening the cold chain, providing vaccines and immunization equipment and motorcycles and vehicles), capacity-building (training) and integration of interventions by including vitamin A supplementation, de-worming, distribution of impregnated mosquito nets and birth registration.

36. The supply of new cold-chain equipment was a particularly useful investment. The old cold-chain equipment required enormous expenditures for repairs and had a weak storage capacity, thus requiring many vaccine orders during the year. Thanks to this equipment and to the overall refurbishment of the cold chain at the national, district and subdistrict levels, cold-chain coverage has increased from 40 per cent in 2003 to 80 per cent in 2005.

37. The **key observations and lessons learned** were:

(a) Strong political will for change and for improvement of the situation of children and women was evident at the level of the national Government, local authorities and in the communities. This is an important factor of success of programme activities;

(b) The lack of adequate international assistance to support the efforts of the Government in addressing the priority needs of children and women was evident throughout the visit. A more concerned and long-term international focus on the plight of Central African Republic seems to be a critical prerequisite for any lasting positive developments in the country;

(c) Sustained political stabilization and further improvement of governance in Central African Republic are essential pre-conditions for ensuring a positive response from the international community, reversing the current negative tendencies in key social areas and starting the movement towards achievement of the Millennium Development Goals;

(d) Community mobilization and women's empowerment are key ingredients for any community development initiative and for realization of children's rights to survival, development and protection;

(e) An integrated approach has the potential for greater and more sustainable impact than any vertical approach;

(f) While Central African Republic has suffered significantly from massive "brain drain", there are capable institutions and individuals in place who work hard to make a difference;

(g) Young people themselves are active partners in the solution of problems affecting them, such as those related to HIV/AIDS;

(h) The UNICEF country office in Central African Republic is a very active and key member of the UNCT. The UNICEF country team has shown its consistent and competent leadership in rallying the United Nations family around the priorities of children's protection and development. The head and staff of the UNICEF country office in their day-to-day activities display an admirable degree of work discipline, persistence, innovation and commitment to the results-based approach;

(i) UNICEF managed to mobilize key donors (not only foreign but national) for children's issues, to the point that the rate of mobilization of other resources has sometimes exceeded the Board-approved ceiling.

38. **Recommendations for future field visits:**

(a) Given the logistical difficulties of the visits, a thematic focus on one or two priority areas, possibly linked to the main agenda items of upcoming Executive Board sessions, would seem more appropriate than trying to cover all aspects of the country programme in equal measure;

(b) To ensure a proper working and results-oriented nature of a visit, the design of its programme should aim at providing an adequate opportunity to witness and study not only the stories of success but also the challenges, difficulties and constraints which a country office faces in its work;

(c) It is important to keep to the practical minimum the purely protocol component of a visit programme while ensuring in advance a strong and pointed advocacy content of official meetings where such are deemed as expedient.

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